

From the Surau to the Madrasah: The Contribution of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah's Thought to the Transformation of Malay Education

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Abstract	
<p>This study explores the intellectual contribution of Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah to the transformation of Islamic education in the Malay world, particularly the shift from the traditional surau system to the modern madrasah. Using a qualitative-historical approach, the research investigates the social, intellectual, and religious contexts that shaped his educational reform movement in early 20th-century Minangkabau. Findings indicate that Amrullah played a crucial role in integrating Islamic values with modern rationality through systemic, methodological, and curricular reforms. He rejected the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences, introduced a structured class-based learning system, and emphasized moral and character education as the foundation of Islamic pedagogy. Thus, it can be concluded that Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah played a significant role in transforming Malay Islamic education from the traditional surau system to the modern madrasah. The principles introduced by Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah included curriculum reform, classical methods, and the integration of religious and general knowledge to form the basis for a rational and contextual Islamic education. His conception of madrasah represented not merely an institutional reform but a manifestation of a progressive and contextual Islamic renewal aimed at liberating the Muslim community from ignorance and colonial domination. Amrullah's educational thought laid a vital foundation for the development of modern Islamic education in Indonesia and the broader Malay world.</p>	<p>Keywords: Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah; Islamic education of malay; Madrasah.</p>

Abstrak	
<p>Penelitian ini membahas kontribusi pemikiran Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah terhadap transformasi pendidikan Islam di dunia Melayu, khususnya peralihan dari sistem tradisional surau menuju madrasah modern. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif-historis, penelitian ini menelusuri konteks sosial, intelektual, dan keagamaan yang melatarbelakangi gagasan pembaruan pendidikan yang diperkenalkan oleh tokoh pembaharu asal Minangkabau tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Syekh Abdul Karim</p>	<p>Kata Kunci: Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah; Pendidikan Islam Melayu; kata Madrasah.</p>

Amrullah berperan penting dalam mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai keislaman dengan rasionalitas modern melalui reformasi sistem, metode, dan kurikulum pendidikan Islam. Ia menolak dikotomi antara ilmu agama dan ilmu umum, memperkenalkan sistem klasikal dalam pembelajaran, serta menekankan pentingnya akhlak dan karakter dalam proses pendidikan. Dengan demikian, dapat disimpulkan bahwa Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah berperan penting dalam mentransformasikan pendidikan Islam Melayu dari sistem surau tradisional menuju madrasah modern. Hal-hal yang dikenalkan oleh Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah yaitu pembaruan kurikulum, metode klasikal serta integrasi ilmu agama dan ilmu umum agar menjadi dasar pendidikan Islam yang rasional dan kontekstual. Gagasan Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah mengenai madrasah bukan sekadar perubahan struktural lembaga, tetapi merupakan manifestasi dari visi pembaruan Islam yang progresif, kontekstual, dan berorientasi pada pembebasan umat dari kebodohan dan kolonialisme. Pemikiran Amrullah telah memberikan fondasi penting bagi perkembangan pendidikan Islam modern di Indonesia dan dunia Melayu secara luas

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1. Introduction

Islamic education in the Malay world developed through a long process that reflected not only religious dynamics, but also social and cultural changes in society. As a system that thrived in traditional communities, Islamic education served not only as a means of transmitting religious knowledge, but also as a vehicle for shaping the moral and social identity of the community. One of the distinctive features of traditional Islamic education in this region is the existence of surau, which serve as centers for learning, moral guidance, and religious social activities. In Minangkabau, surau function as places where religious knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation through the *talaqqi* method, which is direct learning between students and teachers (Soraya, 2021). Before the emergence of the modern education system in the Malay world, religious institutions such as surau and Islamic boarding schools were the main centers of Islamic learning. Surau not only functioned as a place of worship but also as a social and educational institution that played an important role in shaping the religious identity of the community (Syah et al., 2025). Education in surau emphasized the memorization of classical texts or *kitab kuning* (yellow books) through a non-formal system centered on the figure of the ulama. However, with the influx of Western colonialism and the tide of modernization, this traditional model of education began to be considered inadequate to respond to the challenges of the times (Silvia & Zainur, 2023). This situation gave rise to a movement to reform Islamic education, one of which was initiated by Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah, a prominent cleric who played an important role in transforming the education system from surau to madrasah in the Malay world.

The early 20th century was a crucial period for Malay society, especially in West Sumatra, as it saw major changes in the social, economic, and political order. Modernization brought by the Dutch through the colonial education system introduced new teaching methods based on rationality, scientific discipline, and a systematic curriculum structure (Rahmadanil & Zuwanda, 2021). These changes created a gap between secular colonial education and conservative traditional Islamic education. Surau, as centers of education, began to lose their appeal among the younger generation who wanted a more modern education. In this context, there was a need to reform Islamic education so that it remained relevant and competitive with the Western education system. This is where the role of Islamic reformers such as Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah became very important (Amir & Rahma, 2021).

Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah, widely known as Haji Rasul, was one of the most influential reformist scholars in the Malay world. Born in Minangkabau in the late 19th century, he grew up in a strong Islamic scholarly tradition, but also witnessed firsthand the backwardness of the traditional education system around him. After studying in Mecca, he returned to his homeland with a spirit of *tajdid* (renewal) inspired by the reformist thinking of the Middle East, such as Muhammad Abduh and Jamaluddin al-Afghani (Amir & Rahman, 2024). The rational and modernist thinking of these two figures influenced his views on Islamic education in the archipelago. For Abdul Karim Amrullah, Islamic t is not only a ritual religion, but also a moral, intellectual, and social foundation that must guide the progress of the people. The transformation of education from surau to madrasah reflects a paradigm shift in the Islamic learning system in Minangkabau and the Malay world in general. According to Nirwana et al. (2024), Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah believed that the traditional surau model placed too much emphasis on memorization and repetition without developing students' critical thinking skills. Through his idea of establishing madrasahs, he introduced a more structured education system, with subject divisions, study schedules, and clear evaluation methods. Madrasahs became a symbol of the meeting between tradition and modernity—remaining rooted in Islamic values, but also open to general knowledge such as mathematics, language, and social sciences. This innovation paved the way for the birth of an educated Muslim generation ready to face global changes without losing their Islamic identity (Khadimullah, 2024).

The major changes brought about by Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah were certainly not accepted smoothly. Some traditional scholars considered the idea of madrasahs to be a deviation from the surau tradition, which had long been part of the Islamic identity of the Minangkabau (Tambak et al., 2025). They accused this reform movement of attempting to *Westernize* Islamic education. However, Abdul Karim Amrullah emphasized that reform was not a betrayal of tradition, but rather a means of preserving the essence of Islam so that it would not be eroded by intellectual decline. In his various writings, he argued that Islam encourages its followers to think critically and dynamically. Therefore, the modernization of education is not a threat, but an urgent need to build a civilized society. One of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah's great achievements was his success in establishing a madrasah that became a pioneer for the modern Islamic education

system in West Sumatra. Through institutions such as Sumatera Thawalib, he combined Islamic values with organized teaching methodologies (Afdal et al., 2022). The curriculum at this madrasah included religious studies, Arabic, and general knowledge, with an emphasis on analytical skills and scientific discussion. This concept was later followed by various other madrasas in the Malay world, making Islamic education more open and adaptive to the developments of the times. These institutions later produced important figures in the world of education, politics, and da'wah in Indonesia, including his own son, Buya Hamka, who continued his father's vision of renewal.

A number of previous studies have discussed the role of surau in traditional Minangkabau Islamic education and the contributions of reformist figures to the Islamic education system (Nasution, 2018; Rahman, 2020; Soraya, 2021). However, most of these studies focus more on the historical aspects of surau institutions or the biographies of Islamic scholars in general. There have not been many studies that have examined in depth the relationship between the reformist ideas of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah and the transformation of education from surau to madrasah in the Malay world. Therefore, this study occupies an important position in strengthening the understanding of the dynamics of Islamic educational reform and the intellectual contributions of local scholars to the modernization of education in Southeast Asia. Thus, this study aims to analyze the contribution of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah's thoughts to the transformation of Islamic education from the surau system to madrasahs in the Malay world. This study is expected to provide a new perspective on the relationship between tradition and modernity in Islamic education, while also emphasizing the relevance of Amrullah's thoughts to the challenges of Islamic education in the modern era.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a historical method to trace the contribution of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah's thoughts to the transformation of Malay education from the surau system to the madrasah. In (Noor, 2020), the historical approach was chosen because the research topic focuses on past events and ideas that had a significant influence on the development of modern Islamic education in the Malay region, particularly in Minangkabau. Through this method, the researcher sought to understand the social, political, and intellectual context behind the emergence of Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah's ideas on educational reform. The aim was not only to describe historical facts but also to interpret the meaning behind each change that occurred.

Data collection techniques were carried out through *library research*. In this process, the researcher traced various literature related to the history of Islamic education, the renewal movement in the Malay world, and the thoughts of Islamic modernist figures who were contemporaries of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah. The literature was obtained from libraries, national archives, and digital scientific databases. Furthermore, the collected data was classified based on themes, such as: traditional educational background (surau), Amrullah's ideas of renewal, comparisons with other reformist figures, and institutional impacts on the

development of madrasahs. The classification process aimed to make it easier for researchers to find patterns and relationships between concepts that emerged in the study.

3. Results and Discussion

The State of Islamic Education Before the Reformation: The Dominance of Traditional Surau

Before the emergence of ideas for reforming Islamic education in the Malay world, surau were the main educational institutions for the Minangkabau people and surrounding areas. Surau not only functioned as places of worship, but also as centers for social, cultural, and Islamic educational activities. The learning system in surau was traditional and non-formal, where students learned directly from teachers or *tuanku* using methods of memorization, repetition, and role modeling. The curriculum was not systematically organized; the subject matter depended entirely on the abilities and wishes of the teacher (Fariati et al., 2025). Although this model succeeded in preserving classical religious knowledge, it was unable to meet the needs of a society that was beginning to come into contact with the modern world.

The limitations of the surau became even more apparent when the Dutch colonial education system was introduced in West Sumatra. Dutch schools offered more varied subjects, including general knowledge, mathematics, and languages, as well as more systematic teaching methods. As a result, a gap emerged between colonial education, which was oriented on rationality and progress, and traditional Islamic education, which was still centered on memorization. This situation gave rise to a new awareness among young scholars that Islamic education must be reformed in order not to be left behind by the tide of modernization (Arifin et al., 2020). It was in this social and intellectual context that the great reformer Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah emerged, becoming the pioneer of Islamic education transformation in the Malay world.

The Socio-Intellectual Background of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah

Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah, also known as Haji Rasul, was born in 1879 in Minangkabau, a region that had long been a center of Islamic scholarship in the archipelago (Hamka, 2020). He received his early education at a surau (small mosque) before continuing his studies in Mecca, the center of Islamic scholarship in the world, where he interacted extensively with ideas of Islamic renewal from the Middle East. There, Amrullah came into contact with the ideas of Muhammad Abduh and Jamaluddin al-Afghani, two great figures who called for *tajdid* (renewal) and *islah* (reform) in the Islamic world. From these two figures, he learned that Islam is not incompatible with science and progress, but rather serves as a moral foundation for the development of science and civilization (Afdal & Bambang, 2023). Upon his return to Minangkabau, Amrullah found that his community was still trapped in a static education system and resistant to change. The suraus in his village still used conventional teaching methods centered on memorization and did not have a curriculum structure. This situation prompted him to develop a rational and systematic Islamic education system so

that Muslims could compete with other nations (Wahyudi & Fatoni, 2024) . For Amrullah, the revival of the Muslim community could only be achieved through education, as education is the gateway to awareness, independence, and the advancement of civilization. With this spirit, he initiated a major reform that would change the face of Islamic education in the Malay world.

Transformation from Surau to Madrasah: The Formation of a New System

The application of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah's ideas was clearly seen in his efforts to transform the surau system into madrasahs. He did not simply change the name or form of the institution, but introduced a new paradigm in the world of Islamic education. Madrasahs were established with a more organized structure, had classes divided based on student ability, and implemented a curriculum that combined religious and general knowledge. The teaching system, which had previously been individualized, was changed to a classical system that enabled a more effective and efficient teaching and learning process (Djamal, 2020).

In madrasahs, students not only studied fiqh, tafsir, and hadith, but also history, logic, language, and mathematics. This shows that Amrullah had a holistic view of knowledge, believing that the progress of the ummah would not be achieved without mastery of worldly knowledge. Moreover, madrasahs were also used as places for character building and leadership training. Students were educated to think critically, be disciplined, and be responsible to their communities. This transformation marked a major change in the history of Islamic education in the Malay world. Madrasahs became a symbol of the meeting between Islamic values and modernity, where religion was no longer understood narrowly as ritual, but as a value system that encouraged the advancement of science and culture (Satria, 2020). Amrullah's success in designing this educational model made him an important figure in the Islamic modernization movement, as well as an inspiration for the birth of various other modern Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and the Malay region.

Syekh Abdul Karim Amrullah's Thoughts on the Transformation of Malay Education

Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah's thoughts on Malay education reflect the spirit of Islamic renewal rooted in rationality, openness to knowledge, and commitment to moral values. He viewed education as the main pillar of the revival of the ummah and a means to free society from ignorance and colonial domination. To understand his thoughts more comprehensively, they can be outlined in the following points:

a. **Integration between Religious Knowledge and General Knowledge**

One of Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah's main ideas was that Islamic education should include both religious knowledge (*ulum al-din*) and general knowledge (*ulum al-dunya*) (Waharjani & Jailani, 2024) . He rejected the dichotomy of knowledge that limited Islam to only ritual and legal aspects, because for him, all knowledge that was beneficial to the people was part of Islamic teachings. With this view, Amrullah wanted to

eliminate the gap between religious and secular students, which at that time was often contested.

In the education system he envisioned, subjects such as history, mathematics, logic, and language complemented religious studies. Amrullah believed that mastery of general knowledge could strengthen Muslims' ability to understand and develop religious teachings in accordance with the context of the times. He emphasized that a true Muslim must have a balance between intellectual rationality and spiritual faith, so that they are able to fully carry out their role as the vicegerent of Allah () on earth. This idea became an important basis for the emergence of a more modern and inclusive madrasah curriculum in the Malay world.

b. Reform of Teaching Methods and Systems

Amrullah realized that the main weakness of the surau system lay in its traditional and monotonous teaching methods. The learning process in suraus usually took place without a class structure, without a clear curriculum, and was highly dependent on the individual abilities of the teachers. According to (Amir, 2022) , to improve this, he introduced a classical system in Islamic education, namely the division of students based on ability and age, the use of a structured curriculum, and a regular lesson schedule.

In addition, Amrullah applied discussion, question and answer, and logical reasoning methods to make the learning process more interactive and train students' critical thinking skills. He also introduced an evaluation or examination system, something previously unknown in suraus. The purpose of these changes was not only to improve learning efficiency, but also to instill a scientific spirit among Islamic students. Thus, the madrasah system designed by Amrullah not only taught knowledge, but also shaped rational and productive mindsets.

c. Education as a Tool for Liberating the People

For Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah, education was not merely a means of transmitting knowledge, but a tool for struggle and liberation of the people from backwardness and colonialism. He saw that Dutch colonialism not only controlled physical territory but also limited the intellectual progress of Muslims by creating a dualistic education system: colonial schools for the educated elite and traditional surau for the common people (Irfanda & Adnani, 2025) . Therefore, Amrullah was determined to create an Islamic education system that could compete with Dutch schools while remaining grounded in Islamic values.

In his view, ignorance and backwardness were the most dangerous forms of colonialism. According to Amrullah, proper education must raise the awareness of the people to think critically, be independent, and be able to fight for their own independence and that of their nation. Therefore, the madrasah he founded did not only focus on science, but also on the formation of social awareness and Islamic nationalism. With this approach, education became a field of moral and intellectual struggle for the liberation of the Malay people from colonial domination.

d. **Emphasis on the Formation of Islamic Morals and Personality**

In addition to curriculum and method reform, Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah also strongly emphasized the aspects of moral education and character building. According to him, knowledge without morals will only produce intelligent people who have lost their direction and values (Muslim, 2021) . Therefore, Islamic education must balance cognitive aspects with spiritual and ethical aspects. He emphasized that teachers must be role models (*uswah hasanah*) in their words, behavior, and way of life, because true education is not only through teaching, but also through exemplary behavior. Amrullah believes that the ultimate goal of education is to shape knowledgeable and moral individuals who are able to apply their knowledge for the benefit of the people (Miswari, 2024) . In the madrasahs he influenced, lessons on ethics and Qur'anic interpretation were placed as the foundation for all teaching and learning activities. This approach emphasizes that the renewal of Islamic education does not mean abandoning traditional values, but rather reviving them in a format relevant to the demands of the times.

4. Conclusion

Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah played an important role in transforming Malay Islamic education from the traditional surau system to modern madrasahs. He introduced curriculum reforms, classical methods, and the integration of religious and general knowledge as the basis for rational and contextual Islamic education. His ideas made madrasahs not just new institutions, but symbols of modernization and the intellectual revival of the Muslim community in the Malay world. His thinking became an important foundation for the development of modern Islamic education in Indonesia, while also proving that reform can go hand in hand with the preservation of Islamic values.

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